

MY EXPERIENCE OF VARIOUS METHODS

OF

EDUCATING THE DEAF-BORN.



A P A P E R

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BY

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GENTLEMEN,—It is in no spirit of egotism that I venture to bring before you my own experience in various methods of educating the deaf; but in the hope that, in so illustrious an assembly, the convictions of an earnest worker will have due weight.

During the seventeen years I have devoted to the deaf, I have had no thought but their best welfare, I have now no desire stronger than to lead others to my own persuasion, that this is best secured by educating them according to the “German” method, by vocal speech, and lip-reading.

When I began my work in 1863, I had never seen a deaf-born child. I was ignorant that so vast a number of our fellow beings were deprived of the sense of hearing, and I had no idea that so many institutions existed for the amelioration of their condition. All I then knew had been gathered from a short account of Laura Bridgman and James Mitchell, in *Chambers' Magazine*. Very early in life my interest had been aroused by a vivid realization of the nobleness of Dr. Howe's effort to restore Laura Bridgman to social life; but no opportunity of following in his footsteps opened to me till the year of

which I speak. Then I heard through my father, a London physician, of the miserable condition of a young lady, who by a succession of fevers had been left lame, maimed, deaf, and almost blind. No one could be found to educate this unhappy child, and my father was appealed to for advice and assistance. The slumbering desire of my heart awoke, and I gained permission to attempt the task. My pupil retained a few words, chiefly nouns, and my first attention was bent on increasing her store of these. Ignorant as I then was of the science of phonetics, it was no light work to improve her pronunciation and increase her vocabulary: often a week was spent in gaining one new word, her imperfect sight added to my difficulties. The two-handed alphabet was the means of communication on my side; but vocal speech was the natural medium on hers. Slow as the progress was at first, undoubted success crowned my efforts. I abandoned my formerly chosen profession, and gave myself wholly to the education of the deaf. I now heard of the institutions already established, and visited one or two in England in the hope of gaining fresh ideas for my work. I found, however, that my pupils were already in advance of those in the public institutions so far as language was concerned. But I was assured that whatever I had accomplished with children, like my first pupils, deaf from fever, I could do nothing for those born deaf without signs,—conventional signs, as used in the institutions.

I believed the dictum of those so much more experienced than myself, and asked how to gain that knowledge. I was told that it was impossible without myself entering an institution. Nothing then remained but to teach *without* signs, or form them for myself. This to some extent I did, though I dropped them as soon as the spelled form had been learned.

I enter thus minutely into my first steps to show how utterly unprejudiced I was to any system, how ready to adopt anything that could be to the advantage of my pupils.

With regard to signs, I must add, that, on looking back, I date a decline in my success in teaching language, from the time of the introduction of those signs. With the signs "deaf-mutisms" in composition made their appearance: errors which had been unknown before. I am the more persuaded that these "deaf-mutisms" were due to the signs, because looking now at the question from the opposite point of view, I mark a steady increase of success in teaching language, and a disappearance of "deaf-mutisms," step by step as I have laid aside signs. I am certain signs will always injure language, and spoken language is as natural to the deaf as to ourselves when it is, as with other children, the only means of communication presented to them.

Two deaf-born sisters now came to me and, believing as I have been taught, that they were dumb! I made no attempt to gain vocal speech. Twelve months passed, and rumours reached me that in

France and Germany the deaf-born were taught to speak: that they had voices. Now, indeed, my interest was awakened. I had set before myself the goal of restoring my deaf children to home-life and society: what could more fully do this than vocal speech added to the language of books and writing?

Inquiry brought to my knowledge the Jewish Deaf and Dumb Home, then just opened in London by the generosity of the De Rothschild family. This was early in 1868. I applied to the director for instruction in the system; but could not consent to the conditions and restrictions under which alone he offered it to me. I was again thrown back on my own resources. I resolved that my pupils should speak with their voices, but how was I to accomplish my end?

Professor Melville Bell had shortly before published his Visible Speech Alphabet. I had already gained a knowledge of phonetics on another system under his instruction, and I now turned to Visible Speech. I studied the symbols, I saw they were adapted to my purpose. I went to Professor Bell and told him my conviction that here was a channel for conveying speech to the deaf-born. He entered at once into my plan, and his son, now Professor Graham Bell (inventor of the telephone), commenced teaching the system in my school.

Previous to this experiment, I had made a short trial of the old English plan of teaching sounds taught by Wallis and Braidwood, but the efforts of the teacher met with no success. Not so those of Professor Bell

and his son. My pupils learned to speak vocally ; those who had been born deaf even better than those who had become so through fever, and they could also read some few sentences from my lips. Here was the failure of my method at this time. I had speech, but I had not lip-reading, except as an accomplishment. This arose from the facts that Professor Bell strongly disbelieved in the possibility of lip-reading, and that I had noticed signs accompanying the dictated questions and sentences in the only school I had visited, which I then believed to have been on the pure " German " system. I therefore judged it right to continue the combined system into which I had fallen with my old pupils, but fresh ones were not allowed to acquire the finger alphabet. I was anxious, waiting, and watching.

Visitors from America and supporters of the London German school blamed my slowness to adopt lip-reading, but none could answer my doubts or convince me that *that* was the better plan.

At last Miss Rogers, of the Clarke Institution, Massachusetts, came, and gave me fresh hope. She told me facts from her own knowledge and observation and her faith kindled mine. It was not long before I went to America to see for myself, and from that time I steadily approached nearer and nearer to the pure " German " system I now teach, without finger-talking, without phonetic symbols, without signs of any kind whatsoever, and I rejoice every day more and more in witnessing its happy results.

With regard to teaching by phonetic symbols, such as those of Visible Speech, or any other written character, I would express a similar statement to that I made about signs.

Looking back I see them to be more hindrances than helps. By their use the thought becomes clothed in that of the written form, in place of the spoken sound, a process of the translation from writing to speech takes place, whereas the opposite is the natural course.

It was this discovery that made me abandon Visible Speech, and a fuller study of the subject has deepened the axiom in my mind "From speech and lip-reading to writing; have the word pronounced correctly first and then give the written form, but never reverse the process." The system I now follow is almost as much in advance of that I taught by the aid of Visible Speech as that was in advance of the "Combined" System. I have therefore to prove how I gained my present convictions, and in doing so I hope to meet the difficulties of some of those who are honestly opposing what they believe to be an impossible system. I can feel for their doubts and prejudices. I full well remember my own fears; and I also can say I never yielded a step save from conviction, founded on facts seen and realised for myself, or by those in whom I could place implicit trust.

The belief that the voice of the deaf must be harsh and unnatural is one of the greatest obstacles we have to overcome in arguing for the "German" system. In England many people have known or

heard of deaf persons educated under the method introduced by Wallis and Braidwood, whose voices are most harsh and disagreeable, and erroneously supposing this to be the same as the "German" system, they blame the "German" for a failure which is in truth the natural result of a degenerated "Combined" system into which signs and finger-talking have been introduced.

As I originally taught them, my pupils were examples of this. Those who heard them speak condemned their voices as harsh and unnatural. Taught now by the "German" system, the same people say they are not unpleasant and are easy to be understood. This I attribute to the constant use of the voice, together with my own increased skill and watchfulness in teaching.

So long as I taught articulation only as an accomplishment, writing or finger-talking being the more frequent means of converse, my pupils only used their voices when addressing me, and in certain of their studies, consequently, the greater part of the day the vocal organs were lying idle. Now we know that when from disease or disuse any organ has ceased to have its full natural play, the only way to restore vitality is constant persistent exercise of that organ under intelligent guidance and in imitation of the rightful movements and use of such organs.

When deaf children are ignorantly stopped from uttering sounds, because those about them cannot understand what they try to say, their vocal organs are necessarily in this condition of inaction and

consequent deterioration of power. What they need is constant use and diligent, careful drill. With this their voices soon become, if not quite natural, at least not disagreeable.

Constant watchfulness and skill on the part of the teacher, is essential, as well as practice on the part of the pupil. The teacher has, indeed, to become as an ear to the child, doing the work of correcting minute inaccuracies of pronunciation, tone, or quality, which the power of hearing does for others. He must be on the alert in the play-hour as much as in school-time to seize upon errors and correct them; and, to do this to the greatest advantage, he must have not only a thorough knowledge of the mechanism of speech, but also an intimate acquaintance with the anatomy of the organs whose play he seeks to direct.

A "Combined" system, in depriving the pupil of this required practice and constant care, injures the tone of the voice, and, as the deaf are only too ready to think themselves the objects of detractive remarks, persons so taught will soon find out that their speech is peculiar, and be driven to use their voices less, to depend on silent methods more, and to prefer the society of the deaf.

Another drawback to the use of the "Combined" system is, that in treating articulation as a separate study much valuable time is lost to gain an end which, as we have shown, will be futile after all. It is not only that such a number of minutes are absolutely deducted from the school-time, but that those minutes

are not turned to the best account, even for the subject to which they are devoted.

A child taught by the "German" system, constantly using his voice, and constantly noticing the mouths of others, acquires unconsciously many sounds that in study-hours had been difficulties. This is not the case with one taught on the "Combined" system. The study-hour over, all thought and use of sound is set aside; the eye glancing constantly at the hand, never looks up to the mouth. Both mind and organs, so far as vocal speech are concerned, remain passive till the next lesson comes round, when the old ground has to be gone over with ever-increasing tediousness to both teacher and pupil. Even though a certain amount of lip-reading be employed in a "Combined" system, the result will be the same.

Neither articulation nor lip-reading, taught as separate studies, will ever come easily and naturally to the pupil. There will ever be an amount of constraint in the use of them, and when the teacher finds that these methods, taught as he teaches them, are slower and more irksome than the finger alphabet, signs, or writing, he will gradually employ what he supposes to be the slower method less and less. The argument will be—"After all, our great object is to convey knowledge, and it cannot be wrong to give the preference to that method which is the readiest and most certain."

It was thus in my experience, and I have no doubt it would be so with all.

It was this question of conveying the largest amount of knowledge that held me back so long from lip-reading, and it is this which still holds back many English teachers.

My difficulties concerning lip-reading were first removed by the success I witnessed in the Northampton Institution, Massachusetts, conducted by my friend Miss Rogers. I saw that with her pupils, lip-reading did indeed take the place of hearing, and I felt it was the means I had so long sought, by which the deaf would be most fully restored to home and social life. Experience has more than confirmed this conclusion. Not only have I found lip-reading as rapid and certain as finger-talking, I have found it much more so. In using the fingers we are apt to shorten the sentence, or at least to clip it of those exclamations and poetic idioms that make the life of language. This is a great loss to the pupil, for it puts into his hands a poorer language than he finds in books, and when signs are added and still farther mutilate and distort the language, books, such as hearing children of like age delight in, become too often absolutely sealed writings.

We must remember that our great object is to give our pupils language, for this is the parent and offspring of thought, the only channel by which mind can meet mind freely and profitably. Everything that tends to increase language widens this channel. Lip-reading is no doubt the best means to this end. In talking naturally to our pupils, we employ every-day

language—idioms, exclamations, metaphors. They learn to think in language as we think; moreover, they are constantly picking up forms of expression without absolute teaching; and the trained eye of a lip-reader is indeed to him in the place of a hearing ear.

This desire to impart a large amount of “knowledge,” taken as an aim from the beginning, instead of an end to be looked forward to throughout the course, acts with equal harm on the “German” system itself.

It is urged that it is “impossible to do without natural signs,” that “Written language previous to speech is indispensable,” that to forbid these is “to make the commencement of the ‘German’ course *a waste of time.*” Why? “Because, without these, ‘knowledge’ must wait till the pupils have learned to talk as we do.”

Now we admit that the purest “German” system teachers point, perform actions, and use facial expression: without these, to teach at all would be impossible; but these are not signs, they are only passing illustrations which never usurp the place of the spoken word. We also use Writing as a valuable exercise in fixing the form of language, after it has been acquired through lip-reading, but never as a substitute for speech. We maintain that both teacher and pupil must fix a steadfast eye on spoken language as their single aim; that to introduce any other into the field till that has been acquired, is simply to impede the

pupil's progress, by casting a stumbling block in his way.

In maintaining this, we only follow the course of nature.

The child who hears learns first, in its mother's arms, to imitate the sounds she speaks, and gradually forms a daily increasing vocabulary. It would be the height of folly to propose to instruct an infant in physical laws, history, or grammar, the moment it commenced to utter sounds.

No! Years must elapse before school is thought of and regular instruction begun. Why then must "knowledge" be insisted on with the deaf, before correct speech has been acquired?

We are answered,—Because the deaf are no longer infants when they come to us—others of their age are learning at school, and to keep them back for a lengthened time, in order to teach articulation, is to deprive them of a portion of the already too short time for study.

To this we reply,—We deny, altogether, that the "German" system does shorten the school term. The time required for distinct speech, with children over six years, is not more than twelve months at the longest. In less time, with bright children, we are ready to commence language lessons,—such as a writer of the Sign school has pronounced "impossible in so short a time!"

At the end of this short time we are possessed of a perfectly natural means of communication on both

sides, there is nothing to unlearn, only a straight path to pursue, knowing no barrier, and opening ever more and more into fresh fields of knowledge. Again, it must be remembered that that year has not been wasted. The acquirement of lip-reading *essentially depends* on the accurate observation of the minute differences of vowel sounds; and these are much more easily acquired by the child, before he is burdened with a multitude of combinations, and the added task of thought for the meaning of the sounds. Writing, too, has advanced step by step with the sounds; and ease and readiness are gained in this before it is required for language lessons.

Kindergarten occupations in my own school fill up part of this time, and exactness of observation and imitation are thus acquired unconsciously by the child, but with the most beneficial results.

Last, but not least, there have been the constant gymnastic exercises, so essential to develop the child's physical frame, and counteract that tendency to lung disease, distortion of the shoulders, or ungainly carriage, so observable in sign-taught deaf-mutes.

I know this sounds improbable in the ears of many: that there are some who will say, "but I have tried, and found that speech sounds will not come so rapidly." So I thought and said, once; but under the able instruction of Mr. Kinsey, the Principal of our English Training College, and by witnessing the admirable results of his teaching in our Model School, I have learned where I fell short.

It was I that failed, not the System ! I have found that with stronger faith in it, utter surrender of the mistaken desire for speedy knowledge, and more patient drill in the first elements of sound, failure cannot come. Now, I never despair of any sound or of any pupil, though peculiarity of mental power or the effects of illness may make some children slower than others.

My former failure I attribute to the marvellous instinct of children, by which they gauge the mental capabilities of their instructor.

Is the teacher half-hearted, doubtful of success, disheartened by defeat,—the child has no courage to repeat his efforts, no will to overcome difficulties. Is the teacher confident, bright, undaunted,—the child is equally unwearied, and the much coveted acquirement comes, as the well-earned reward to both. I believe there is no deaf child who may not be taught to speak, and to speak well ; unless there be malformation, or added defect of brain power.

But does this apply equally to the rich and poor ? Is it possible to provide this education for all classes alike ? Others will enter more fully into this question. I will only say that there is no reason it should not be. There is every reason to make such an education of greater value to the poorer classes than to the rich. These have Home and ample means to fall back upon ; those have no future provision but their own labour, and employment is far more likely to be found by those who can converse as other men do, than by those

who require an interpreter, or demand an out-of-the-way means of communication.

But to make this feasible, one thing is indispensable, that is, well-trained, duly qualified teachers.

More hindrances have been thrown in the path of the "German" system, by the well-meant efforts of persons but partially acquainted with it, than by the opposition of all the sign-schools together. Opposers simply disbelieve what they have not proved for themselves; but supporters, unacquainted with the system in its entirety, and failing for want of a more perfect knowledge, dishonour the system they profess, in the eyes of the world.

The establishment, in every country of the globe, of Training Colleges for Teachers, (such as that we now have in England) would be a most valuable result of our present Congress.

Many teachers are required, because our System demands many schools, consisting of small bands of scholars. Whenever possible, tutors and governesses should be employed to give home education to our deaf children, as to those who hear.

When we look at the home life, the social life, and, above all, the religious life of the deaf, at how much greater advantage are those who can freely converse with others by speech and lip-reading, compared with the disciples of the sign-language, who must necessarily confine their intercourse within a circle,—the limited circle,—of those who have learned the same mode of converse with themselves.

Pupils of the "German" system can talk with brothers and sisters in the familiar language of the nursery, and take part, later in life, in the fireside chat or the discussion of passing topics. The special portion of their school-life over, they can be instructed by teachers unacquainted with the system, can receive Divine Truth from the lips of the ordinary pastor, and be solaced by his words in the hours of sickness and death.

Such, Gentlemen, is the conclusion to which experience has led me. I gave up "Signs" because I found they injured language; I gave up the "Combined" system because it injured the voice, as well as language; I gave up "Vocal Symbols" because they reversed the process of nature, and hindered ready command of speech. But I *rest* in the plan I now pursue,—with perfect satisfaction.

It is my earnest hope that the conclusion of this Congress will see the "German" system placed in the fore-front, as the best and most *natural* method of educating the Deaf.

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